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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine whether the expressed reading interests of third grade students corresponded with the topics in their basal readers. Students indicated on an interest survey the kinds of stories they liked to read. Two fourth grade basal readers were analyzed--"Time to Wonder" by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, and "Clearing Paths" by D. C. Heath--and 22 interests were noted. These story categories were compared with the children's choices to determine if any agreement existed. The results indicated that the topics most frequently encountered in the classsroom basal series included poetry, animal stories, biographies, careers, and folk tales. While students' favorite category of stories was adventure, stories of this type occurred infrequently in the two basal series surveyed. (A copy of the survey instrument is appended.) (HTH)

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ARE THE INTERESTS OF THIRD GRADE STUDENTS THE SAME AS THE TOPICS FOUND IN THEIR CLASSROOM BASAL READERS?

by

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Master of Arts Degree
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ABSTRACT

Third grade students' interests were compared with the story content of the basal readers used in the classroom to determine if a relationship existed. Student interests were determined through the use of interest surveys. Two fourth grade basal readers were analyzed to determine if students' interests were reflected in the story content. The results of this study indicated that the selections in the basal readers did not coincide with the interests of the children who used them.

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Basal readers are being used in a majority of classrooms as a means for teaching children basic reading skills. Do the stories in these basal readers reflect the interests of the students who read them? Some recent studies (Meisel and Glass, 1970; Bouchard, 1971; Martin, 1972) have revealed that students' interests are not reflected in basal reader content.

Before investigating to find the answer to this question it is important to define the term interest. According to Paul Witty and Associates (1960), "Interest is a disposition or tendency which impels an individual to seek out particular goals for persistent attention." Although interests are based on the individual's constitutional nature and personality structure as affected by his experiential background, they should be looked upon as acquired.

It seems reasonable to suggest that students will be more likely to enjoy learning to read if what they read interests them. Joseph Leibowicz (1983) makes the following statement about interests, "Determining what interests children requires serious ongoing research, and giving children 'what they want' cannot simply supersede the teacher's obligation to guide students toward quality reading."

Research has also been done on teachers' knowledge of their students' interests. The interests of students

in grades three and four were monitorec by Eugene H. Baker (1968). His most significant finding was that an alarming disagreement existed between the preferences of children and the predictions of their teachers. According to Baker, "This simply means that teachers generally don't know what their children prefer."

Eleanor Stephenson (1972) found interest to be an important factor in the reading process. Teachers can help establish within the child a desire to read, if the child's reading material coincides with his/her interests (Dallman and De Boer, 1960).

When basal readers are closely examined "striking discrepancies" exist between what children indicate they want to read and what they get in their school readers (Ford and Koplyay, 1968). There appears to be evidence to support the hypothesis that stories included in basal readers do not reflect the interests of tne students that read them.

Educational materials, including basal readers, are being written or updated and published continually. The content of basal readers has undergone change over the years. This can be seen by the elimination of sexism in children's literature. It is quite possible that the content of today's basal readers do, in fact, reflect the interests of students.

HYPOTHESIS

The comparison of children's interests and the story content of the basal readers they use is important to the classroom teacher, supplemental teacher, principal and curriculum coordinator of a school district. This information could be utilized in selecting basal readers and other supplemental materials for the students.

It is hypothesized that the interests of third grade students will not be the same as the topics found in their classroom basal readers.

DEFINITIONS

Basal Readers - The basal readers referred to in this study are Holt, Rinehart and Winston's Time to Wonder and D. C. Heath's Clearing Paths.

Interest Survey - questionnaire to be filled out by the students concerning their interests.

Interests - "a feeling of wanting to know, see, do, own, share in, or take part in" (Thorndike-Barnhart, 1967).

Third Grade Students - In this study, the third grade students are children enrolled in one of two third grade classes at Deerfield School, Short Hills, New Jersey.

ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

It was assumed that the interest survey would determine enough information about the students' interests. It was also assumed that the children in this study would respond to the interest survey honestly. A final assumption was that basal readers did not reflect the children's interests.

One of the limitations was that only one class was included in this study, totaling eighteen students. The population of students investigated was confined to one school, providing another limitation. The study was only concerned with students at the third grade level and this provided another limitation. The survey results were limited to the questions asked. A final limitation was that only two basal readers were reviewed.

PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the expressed interests of third grade students corresponded with the story content of the basal readers used in the classroom. Eighteen third grade students from Deerfield School in Short Hills, New Jersey were involved in this study. Short Hills is a community composed mostly of upper class professional people. Deerfield School students represent a variety of nationalities, including some children originally born in other countries.

In the school where the study was carried out, there were two third grade classes. One class was selected for this study. The researcher distributed an interest survey to the children. The students were told that the purpose of the survey was to learn the types of stories they enjoyed reading.

For each story category the students responded with a + if they enjoyed reading about it, and 0 if they did not. In addition, they selected their three favorite and three least favorite types of stories. Questions were also asked about the students recreational reading habits and interests in general. The only instructions given to the class were those that appeared on the interest survey itself (Appendix A). No time limit was set for completion, but the students were asked to complete the entire survey.

The basal readers used for this study were: Time to Wonder published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston and Clearing Paths published by D. C. Heath. The purpose of examining the texts was to determine if there was any agreement between the content of the basal readers and the interests of the children.

A survey was made of the two fourth grade level basal readers to develop a basis for classifying the stories. As shown in Table I, interest categories in twenty-two areas were noted.

Table I

Interest Categories in Basal Stories

1. Adventure	12. Science Fiction
2. Animals	13. History
3. Autobiography	14. Hobbies
4. Biography	15. Humor
5. Careers	16. Mystery
6. Contemporary Life	17. Myths
7. Fables	18. Poetry
8. Fairy Tales	19. Science
9. Fantasy	20. Science Fiction
10. Folk Tales	21. Sports
11. Friendship	22. Travel

Each story in each reader was classified in one interest category. The results of this survey were compared with the results of the children's interest survey.

The researcher tallied the interest surveys to determine the children's favorite and least favorite types of stories. Next, the writer categorized the basal readers separately and then combined the results. Finally, the writer compared these story categories with the children's choices to determine if any agreement existed.

RESULTS

Table II shows the average rank order of topics when Holt's Time to Wonder and D. C. Heath's Clearing Paths were combined, i.e., it shows the rank assigned to the category with the highest number of selections in each text, the next highest, etc. The ranks of each text were arranged to produce the final rank.

Table II

Average Rank-Order of Fourth Grade

Holt and D. C. Heath Topics

Topics	Rank
Poetry	1
Animals	2
Biography	3
Careers	4
Folk Tales	5

In order to determine the students favorite and least favorite types of stories, a ranking system was used. The students were asked to mark their favorite types of stories first, second, and third. They were also asked to mark their three least favorite types of stories by an A, B, or C. When the responses were compiled the following point value system was used: first choice = 3 points; second choice = 2 points; and third choice = 1 point. Each category was then

tallied.

When the data were analyzed similarities and discrepancies could be seen as illustrated in Tables III and IV.

Table III

Average Rank-Order of the Two Fourth Grade Basals Topics Compared with Interests of Children

Basal Topic Rankings		Third Grader Rankings	
Topics	Rank	Topics	Third Graders
Poetry	1	Adventure	1
Animals	2	Mystery	2
Biography	3	Fantasy	3
Careers	4	Sports	4
Folk Tales	5	Animals	5
		Hobbies	5

Table III reveals that the third graders chose adventure, mystery and fantasy stories as their favorites. This was contrary to the basals which featured poetry, animal and biography stories with greatest frequency. An approximate match between students' choices and basal materials was seen only in the animal stories category.

In analyzing the basal readers and comparing them to the students' preferred topics, the writer found they did not compare favorably. There were very few stories in Time to Wonder and Clearing Paths about the students' most popular choices of adventure, mystery

and fantasy.

Table IV

Average Rank-Order of the Two Fourth Grade Basals Topics Compared with Least Favorite Interests of Children

Basal Topic Rankings		Third Grader Least Favorite Rankings	
Topics	Rank	Topics	Third Graders
Poetry	1	Careers	1
Animals	2	Autobiography	2
Biography	3	Contemporary Life	3
Careers	4	Myths	4
Folk Tales	5	Fables	5
		Fairy Tales	5
		Sports	5

Table IV reveals that the third graders chose careers, autobiography and contemporary life stories as their least favorites. An analysis of the data revealed only one inconsistency. Careers was the third graders least preferred topic. This type of selection appeared quite frequently in the basal readers, especially in Time to Wonder.

With the exception of careers, however, the basals did not offer too many stories in the areas least preferred by the third graders.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study revealed that the topics most frequently encountered in the classroom basal series included: poetry, animal stories, biographies, careers and folk tales. It was surprising to discover that while the students' overwhelming favorite category of stories was adventure, stories of this type occurred infrequently in the two basal series surveyed.

Basal series have come a long way in improving the content of their readers with respect to the elimination of stereotypes. Based on the results of the students surveyed in this study however, continued revision seems to be needed. Since a majority of children learn to read using a basal program, it is important that these materials reflect the interests of the students who use them. It is known that motivation to learn will be higher if students are interested in what they are reading.

The results of this study indicated that the selections in the basal readers do not coincide with the interests of the children who use them. There were limiting factors in this study, including the size of the sample and the number of basal readers analyzed. Therefore, the writer recommends that future research involve a larger number of students and more than two basal series.

STUDENT INTERESTS AND BASAL STORIES: RELATED RESEARCH

What exactly do we mean by the term interest? Jacob W. Getzels (1956) defines interest in the following manner: "An interest is a characteristic disposition, organized through experience, which impels an individual to seek out particular objects, activities, understandings, skills or goals for attention or acquisition."

Elizabeth Hurlock (1956) states that an interest is "a learned motive which drives the individual to act in accordance with that interest. It is a preoccupation with an activity when the individual is free to choose."

E. K. Strong (1955) suggests four qualitative criteria of interest: persistent attention, activity, feeling and direction. Intensity and duration might be considered to be quantitative criteria attributed to interest.

John T. Guthrie (1981) believes that student interests are "what a person is attracted to." Interest can also refer to accomplishment. People tend to have an above average knowledge or expertise in their areas of interest. Teachers are aware that interest is an important factor in learning. "Learning requires sustained energy, which in turn requires the use of materials that will attract and engross the student." Students respond more positively and for longer periods of time to high interest materials as opposed to low interest materials In addition, there is a high level of comprehension for high interest materials.

High interest materials are more easily comprehended

because increased attention is focused on the content of the passage and background knowledge is superior. Margery R. Bernstein (1955) found similar results in her study.

Guthrie (1981) cites an unpublished investigation addressing whether the interest effect on comprehension is due to an attentional factor or higher background of knowledge. The results revealed that "when students' knowledge about the topic was equated, their amount of interest did not increase or decrease their ability to comprehend passages on the topic." Interest in a particular topic leads to knowledge, which leads, in turn, to increased comprehension. This information must be kept in mind as materials are selected for students to read. Educators must do their best to provide high interest materials.

Various methods have been used to pinpoint and study children's interests such as the interest inventory, questionnaire, the "log" of activities, the interview, the anecdotal record, and observation under various conditions.

Paul Witty and Associates (1960) devised a series of four questionnaires to be used to study interests. The items listed in the questionnaires dealt with the following areas: play and recreational activities; TV, radio, and movie preferences; reading pursuits; and vocational and educational interests. The results of this study, conducted from 1958 to 1959, cited the mass media, more

specifically TV, to be of great interest to children. Witty notes that children tend to spend less time in outdoor play, sports, hobbies and creative activities than they did in earlier years. He feels this can be attributed to the influence of TV.

Although this paper is concerned with children's interests in general, and their reflections in basal reader stories, it is also important to look at children's reading interests. One way to guage children's reading interests is to refer to the International Reading Association journal The Reading Teacher. Each issue has a section entitled "Children's Choices". Each month a team of experts compile an annotated bibliography of favorite selections. These favorite selections are voted upon by children and presented in six categories.

Researchers have carefully examined these "Children's Choices" listings to "determine exactly what specific qualities make certain books or types of books appealing to children" (Leibowicz, 1983). They concluded that "parents and teachers should use variety and integrity in story structure rather than adherence to critically approved true narrative as the criteria for selecting literature for children, including basal readers and supplementary literature texts."

The topic of children's interests has been investigated by numerous researchers. An article by Virgil M. Howes

(1963) compiles a list of seven of the most significant conclusions and identifies the teacher as the key person in promoting efficient learning.

Paul C. Burns and Betty D. Roe (1976) also stress the importance of the teacher:

> The teacher must have more than a knowledge of the interests of children in general. There is no guarantee that a particular child has the same interests as does the "average" child. The teacher must know the specific interests of each pupil and how these interests can be used to encourage reading.

A problem sometimes faced by teachers is how to get students to pinpoint the types of reading materials they prefer. Eugene H. Baker (1968) states that one way to get students to express their story preferences is to allow them to select their own reading material from the library. Children should then be asked why they made the choice they did.

Baker was concerned with the problem of motivation as it pertains to the disadvantaged child. He believed that the home of the disadvantaged child failed to provide him with stimuli and experiences which prepare him for success with the basal reading program used in the classroom. The language used in these basal readers is so structured that the disadvantaged child is already beyond his capabilities before he begins. In order for him to keep up with the program he must progress at an even faster rate than normal.

In addition to the problems imposed by the language used in the readers there is concern about the actual story content and its appeal to both the disadvantaged and advantaged child. A study was designed and conducted by Robin Ford and Janos Koplyay (1968). Their objective was to identify the interests of children from deprived areas and determine if the interests differed from those of upper middle-class Caucasian children.

They hypothesized that if the learning material was interesting to the children they would be motivated to learn, achieve greater success, retain their interest in school, and go on to become successful and contributing community members.

Primary grade students from the Watts-Compton School District near Los Angeles, an urban Negro lower-class area, and primary students from Chicago's suburban white upper middle-class area were surveyed. Ford and Koplyay found that "children's interests are related to age and sex to a much greater extent than socioeconomic background." The most significant finding revealed by the Story Preference Test indicated that "there are striking discrepancies between what children indicate they want, and what, in fact, they get." This finding suggests that children's preferences are generally not known by their teachers. Whether advantaged or disadvantaged students, teachers do not know what their children are interested in and want to read about.

Ford and Koplyay feel that although much of the existing material is good, more must be done to create and supply teachers with realistic materials.

An attempt to replicate and validate Ford and Koplyay's study (1968) was made by Kay Dian Brown and Gerald H. Krockover (1974). The results indicated that "although teachers were unfamiliar with children's literary preferences at the first semester of the school year, they were generally able to select their children's preferences by the end of the school term." The results also revealed that children participating in individualized reading programs possess a broader range of interests. Brown and Krockover suggest these broad interests might be due to the fact that the children involved in individualized reading programs may have been exposed to various types of reading material and found it enjoyable. Children involved in a basal reading program, however, are exposed to editor-selected stories which may not broaden their interests.

Walter B. Barbe (1963) stresses the importance of interest in reading. "Developing permanent interest in reading must be a primary goal of every teacher, regardless of the particular subject which she may be teaching."

Barbe discusses the interest approach to teaching reading:

> Once interest is aroused the learning to read process is greatly simplified. Until interest in reading is aroused, however, learning to read is little more than a mechanical, rote accumulation of isolated skills which actually have little relationship to reading.

Barbe feels that mastery of basic skills together with development of permanent interests in reading are necessary in order for reading instruction to be successful.

Ideas from the past such as "something is good for children to learn because it is difficult and uninteresting" and "because something is hard it should be avoided" are no longer held. Present-day thinking recognizes the interest approach to teaching reading to be highly effective.

Barbe advocates the concept of "self-selection". He believes children should be allowed to select their own reading materials. Self-selection can result in several positive outcomes. For example, Barbe contends that when children are especially interested in a certain topic, they are able to read more difficult material than they would if the topic was of little interest to them. In addition, he feels this technique encourages the development of permanent interest in reading.

The teacher plays an important role in developing within children, interest in reading. She acts as a role-model since children actually "catch" interest in reading from her as well as from the other children in the room.

According to Barbe, developing permanent interest in reading is perhaps the most important goal in the teaching of reading.

David Kopel (1963) agrees that "the effective teacher fosters interest in learning and nurtures those interests which contribute to growth and maturity."

Much research has been devoted to the identification of children's interests. There have also been studies to determine whether children's interests are reflected in the story content of basal reading textbooks. The results of these studies may have an effect on those educators responsible for the selection of reading materials. Richard J. Smith and Dale D. Johnson in their book Teaching Children to Read (1980) present eight guidelines for selecting reading materials. One guideline pertains exclusively to interest:

> Consider the interest value of the children's book -- the quality of the literature, the variety of the content. Are the selections motivating, and do they extend children's experiences and ideas? How much time does the reading program devote to the enrichment of children's interests and attitudes? What is the quality of the suggested activities?

Florence T. Pieronek (1980) discusses the prevalence of basal readers in today's classroom. "Basal readers are used in one form or another by 80 to 90% of teachers as the vehicle for teaching children basic reading skills."

Research supports the belief that student interest in reading material is an important factor in the teaching of reading (Robinson, 1955; Piekarz, 1956). Therefore, it seems reasonable to expect student interests to be reflected in the content of basal readers. Research studies (Meisel and Glass, 1970; Bouchard, 1971; and Martin, 1972) reveal that student interests are not reflected in the content of basal readers.

Pieronek (1980) notes the frequency with which basal readers are being written and revised. She questions whether change has occurred and if, in fact, "publishers have reviewed the recent research on reading interests before designing their series."

Karlin (1975) states the reading system "attempts to cover a complete range of reading skills and to develop suitable reading habits and attitudes through sequential instruction via exposure to appropriate reading material."

The basal reading system is composed of reading books, workbooks, teacher's guidebook, manual or resource book, filmstrips and supplementary library materials. Pieronek believes that the basal reader should not be expected to reflect interests, however, the other materials within the system should.

Length of time required to write and publish a basal system also has an effect on whether or not student interests are reflected. Pieronek reminds the reader that it

takes from five to seven years for completion of basal reading programs. "However complete a reflection it is of student interests at the time the authors conceived it, it may not reflect children's interests at the time of publication since many interests are the result of unpredictable trends." Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to expand basal reader content with materials that will meet individual needs.

Dolores Durkin (1980) believes:

> The most carefully designed instructional program will succeed only to the extent that it is able to win and keep the children's attention. While teachers are not to be thought of as entertainers, the most successful ones keep children's interests in mind when they plan for instruction and select materials.

Durkin goes on to say that teachers are in a far better position to know what will motivate a specific group of students than are the authors of basal reader programs.

A study of national polls and surveys of current adult reading habits done by Pocella (1964) revealed that American children are not, in general, book lovers. In fact, reading consistently ranked below other choices as a favorite pastime activity of children.

Large amounts of time, energy and money are devoted to the teaching of reading. Unfortunately, even the capable readers appear disinterested in reading. According to Donald W. Pfau (1967):

> Much of the problem can be traced to the fact that young children encounter too many reading programs which are devoid of intrinsically rewarding reading experiences. Overly narrow reading programs, often lacking enthusiastic endorsement of the teacher, deprive children of the enriching activities and materials which could foster personal enjoyment of reading. Such reading programs fail to differentiate between those experiences which build reading skills and those experiences which build attitudes and habits.

In order to develop permanent interest in reading the child must identify with the reading program and enjoy using the materials. Getzels (1956) provides his philosophy of reading in the following statement: "One cannot so much teach interests as offer appropriate models for identification." In other words, although teachers cannot teach students to be interested in reading, they can provide them with an enticing recreational reading program.

Pfau (1967) contends that the use of reading materials as the sole means of exposure to reading will not guarantee active interest in reading among children. Basal readers are especially useful in the systematic development of reading skills but do little to develop positive reading habits and attitudes outside of school. According to Pfau, the basal reading program should be looked upon as the place where skills and abilities are developed. Independent reading periods are the times when reading interests should

be developed and extended.

Loretta Byers (1964) makes the following statement about interest:

> What a child reads with interest is rewarding to him and may lead to further reading; what a child reads without interest may assist in the development of reading skills but may impede the formation of positive attitudes toward reading and the desire to do more reading.

A study was performed by Pieronek (1980) to determine whether intermediate students' interests were reflected in eight basal reader series. She concluded that because their purpose and nature basal readers can and should not be expected to reflect the current interests of students. However, she states that the readers do reflect most of the students' interests reasonably well.

J. Bryan Moffet (1982) revealed after an examination of public school reading materials that the majority were outdated, uninteresting and often untrue to life. He states this material "would turn anyone off including the children in our schools."

Moffet points out the repetition found in most reading books is due to the necessity to carefully control sight vocabulary and gradually develop the reading skills. Not only does this pattern exist in the primary grades but also in the upper elementary grades as well. Unfortunately this results in extreme dullness for the student. Moffet feels that there must be a better way to develop these

reading skills. He believes curiosity and interest should be looked upon as very potent motivators in encouraging students learning. Teachers should capitalize on children's curiosity and personal interests when developing reading skills.

Although Moffet suggests other ways to help improve reading skills, including use of non-textbook reading materials, content area materials and children's writing, he feels the elementary school basal reading textbook need not be abandoned entirely. Basal readers that are carefully evaluated and selected and "fit the criteria of interest, relevance and usefulness" can be helpful to children. Moffet believes that teachers have the right and duty to choose what is most helpful for their students. Since other materials are available, teachers should not be forced to "cover" the basal reader.

This compilation of research suggests two important conclusions: 1) Student interest is an important factor that must be taken into account when developing the reading program; and 2) There is genuine concern that the content of basal readers does not reflect the interests of students.

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APPENDIX A

Interest Survey

1. Beside each type of story place a + if you enjoy reading about it and 0 if you do not.

____	Adventure	____	Historical Fiction
____	Animals	____	History
____	Autobiography	____	Hobbies
____	Biography	____	Humor
____	Careers	____	Mystery
____	Contemporary Life	____	Myths
____	Fables	____	Poetry
____	Fairy Tales	____	Science
____	Fantasy	____	Science Fiction
____	Folk Tales	____	Sports
____	Friendship	____	Travel

2. Mark your three favorite types of stories 1, 2, 3.
3. Mark your three least favorite types of stories A, B, C.
4. Do you like to read?_____
5. Do you like to read for pleasure at home?_____
6. Would you rather read or watch T.V.?_____
7. Do you read more or watch T.V. more every day?_____

_____

8. Do you ever take out books from the Millburn Public Library?_____
9. Do you like to read magazines? If yes, which ones?

_____

10. Do you like to read comic books?_____

11. Do you ever select a book about something you don't know?_____

12. Would you rather select your own book or have someone tell you what to read?_____

13. Do you ever read the newspaper?_____

14. Do you ever watch the news on T.V. or listen to it on the radio?_____

15. What do you like to do most in school?_____

_____

16. What do you like to do most after school or over the weekend?_____

17. Do you have any hobbies? If so, what are they?_____

_____

18. What would you like to be when you grow up?_____

_____

19. If you were given three wishes, what would you choose?

1)_____

2)_____

3)_____

20. Do you find the stories in your school reading textbook interesting?_____